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SUBJECT: KORAN COURSES: HIGH DEMAND, UNCERTAIN SUPPLY

REF: ANKARA 1710

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) recently proposed a new law removing the age limit on summer Koran courses. Under the current law, only children who have finished the fifth grade can enroll in summer Koran courses. The proposed change generated both positive and negative reactions from across the spectrum. Some educators and Islamic scholars complained that these courses are not age-appropriate and are not taught by qualified instructors. However, they also conceded an increasing desire by parents to educate their children about the Koran and about Islam, whether or not the government's Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) provides that education. The only other alternative for religious education are courses operated by religious sects called tarikats. However, their operation is illegal and there is no government oversight of their content or messaging. Although supporters of tarikats claim that private classes are protected by the right to freedom of religion, their opponents suspect that these sects are dictating radical ideological beliefs -- as well as prejudiced gender-biased messages -- to increasingly younger children in the name of religious education. END SUMMARY.

Koran Courses

12. (C) In a recent meeting, Ahmet Durmus, the Diyanet's Ankara Kecioren Muftu (the civil servant in charge of local religious affairs), explained that Koran courses are administered by the Diyanet to teach Islam and how to read the Koran in Arabic, as a curriculum distinct from the compulsory religious education classes in primary and secondary schools in Turkey. There are three types of Koran courses administered by the Diyanet: Summer Koran courses, year-long Koran courses -- which may be taught at facilities with dormitories for students, and three year-long "hafizlik" courses. (Note: A hafiz is a person who has memorized the Koran. End note) Gifted students are selected for the intensive hafizlik courses to become Koran reading teachers. According to the law, only children who have completed their primary education -- eight years of continuous education by age fifteen -- can attend the Koran courses. If the AKP's draft law passes, there will be no such age limit for the summer Koran course attendance for children.

13. (C) In addition to the Diyanet's Koran courses, there are numerous Koran courses that are unauthorized but are administered by religious sects, known as tarikats. These curriculums are decided by each organization's religious leader (a sheikh), and many of our contacts suspect that most of these classes espouse conservative and biased Islamic views. They operate with the donations of their members and their supporters, but their operation is illegal under

Turkish law. However, as we have been told, enforcement of the law against private Koran courses is weak.

The Age Debate for Koran Courses

14. (C) Following the 1997 "post-modern coup" against the perceived Islamic tendencies of the government of then-PM Erbakan, minimum compulsory education increased from five to eight years of continuous education, and the age limit for Koran Course admissions was increased to fifteen years of age. Although secularists touted these changes as an improvement in the educational standards in Turkey, Islamists saw the change as based on a desire to discriminate against religious education. A robust debate on religious education has begun recently, with AKP's proposed law on removing the age limitation on the summer Koran course admissions.

15. (C) Islamic-oriented and secular educators appear to agree, however, that the message that has been delivered in both authorized and illegal Koran courses is not age-appropriate. Askin Asan, a former professor of religious education and an AKP MP, stated that when religious education is given under the age of 10 it can create deep fears in children. She underlined that the religious education provided in schools is sufficient for children and any additional religious education should be done only under the guidance of properly trained educators. She added that parents often send their children to Koran courses in order to raise them with proper moral values. However, she claimed that these institutions use the threat of heavy punishment and fear to indoctrinate their students. Asan said she also

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sent her children to these Koran courses but withdrew them when she learned that they were hearing menacing instructions about such things as life after death, and how one might suffer from one's sins while dying. Those messages scared her daughter.

16. (C) Ayse Sucu, the Diyanet Foundation's Women's Branch head and a former Koran course instructor, told us that she is "ashamed" of the type of education that she was delivering compared to her knowledge today. (Note: She has a PhD in theology from Ankara University and is still taking advanced theology courses. End note) She thinks that Koran education too often is not taught properly, and uses teachings based on misinterpreted hadiths, which are Muhammad's utterances, deeds, and tacit approvals regarding to Islam, allegedly collected and promoted by his companions. Misinterpreted hadiths may mislead children about some moral values, she said, including gender-biased interpretations of roles in society. She added that although Diyanet Koran courses also need many improvements, it is still important to have a state-based control mechanism for such classes. She emphasized that the Diyanet has a more neutral tone of delivering religious education messages, in contrast to the unauthorized courses that impose their tarikat's ideological beliefs. She said that after attending those tarikat courses, some children refuse to sit next to children of the opposite gender in their schools, and may refuse to hold hands with children of the opposite gender during games and sports activities.

Is Unauthorized Better than Nothing?

17. (C) We recently visited a government-regulated Koran course and its dormitory building. The school had three Koran course rooms, one adult Koran course room, and three hafizlik training rooms. According to Fatma Askar, the head of the Diyanet's Koran course for girls, the demand for the regular Koran course and the summer Koran course has been increasing for the last couple of years, and the number of students has doubled since last year. Asked why all their students were wearing head-to-toe dark "carsafs," similar to

that which Iranian women wear, Askar replied that this practice was not a requirement but only a suggestion made by their instructors and students were choosing to follow it. The Koran course has a dormitory for students as well as a gym, a conference room and a lounge. She told us that Koran courses are funded by the donations of the people who are living in the district, and that they tend to be very generous with their contributions. When asked about the unauthorized Koran courses in Turkey, she stated that those Koran courses are extremely conservative in their teachings. They do not follow an authorized curriculum and they do not have formally trained teachers, she said. However, she suggested that having unauthorized Koran courses is better than not having a Koran course at all.

18. (C) Hidayet Tuksal, the head of the Islamic-oriented Capital Women's Platform who used to be a member of an illegal tarikat, shared with us that many ultra conservative parents would like to provide a religious education for their children starting at age three. She explained that a certain segment of society believes that in Ottoman days children started to receive Koran education from the time they were four years, four months, and four days old. Her hafiz friends, who are teaching how to read and memorize the Koran in Arabic, told her that this type of intense religious education at this early age can be a very traumatic experience for children and can create developmental problems. Despite this, some parents are convinced that intense religious education will expand their children's learning capacity in the long run.

Gender and the Koran Courses

19. (C) All of our contacts said that Koran courses are heavily dominated by female students across the country. Durmus stated that the majority of the Diyanet-regulated Koran course students are female. He added that since the legal age for beginning Koran course education has increased to fifteen, most males who are the right age are not interested -- they would rather spend their free time out of school, with their friends. However, he said, parents put pressure on their daughters to attend the courses to inculcate them with high moral values, and female students generally want to fulfill their parents' expectations. Sucu stated that Koran courses sometimes are

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the only education option for females who are living in rural areas, especially in the Southeast, and they are the only places that their parents will allow them to go. Tuksal noted that Koran courses not only teach how to read the Koran, but also how to be a "proper" woman in society, albeit sometimes based on "wrongly interpreted hadiths and cultural biases."

Comment

10. (C) Koran courses often have been used as an ideological trading card and a manipulative tool of both secular- and Islamic-oriented politicians. While the AKP may have proposed to change the law as a response to the expectations of their voter base, the new draft law has elicited polarized reactions from different segments of society, as well as from educators and Islamic scholars. They all agreed that Koran courses are needed in Turkish society. However, none of the changes addresses the core issues of: a) what message to deliver, and b) at what age. Meanwhile, the dominance of demand over supply is generating an increase in unauthorized Koran courses run by religious sects, a situation which only underscores the risk of extremism.

SILLIMAN